



Ignition Interlock Devices: How They Work and What Drivers Should Know

An ignition interlock device, often called an IID, is a breath-testing device connected to a vehicle's starting system. It prevents the vehicle from starting unless the driver provides a breath sample below a preset alcohol threshold.

Interlocks are used throughout the United States, but the requirements differ by state. Installation may be required after an impaired-driving offense or as a condition of obtaining restricted driving privileges, and the applicable rules determine how long the device must remain installed.

How an Ignition Interlock Works

Before starting the vehicle, the driver blows into a handheld unit using the technique taught by the installer. The device measures breath alcohol concentration and allows the vehicle to start only if the sample meets the program's requirements.

An unsuccessful test can trigger a waiting period before another attempt, and the device records testing activity. The threshold is generally much lower than the alcohol level associated with an adult DUI offense, so drivers should not treat an interlock as permission to drink before driving.

[NHTSA explanation of alcohol ignition interlocks](#)

Retests May Be Required After the Engine Starts

Many devices request additional breath samples after the vehicle has started, sometimes called rolling retests. These checks help discourage someone from having another person provide the initial sample or consuming alcohol after starting the vehicle.

An interlock does not shut off a running engine because of an unsuccessful retest. Depending on the device and program, a missed or failed sample may trigger warnings, be recorded for review, or lead to restrictions on restarting the vehicle.

Ask the installer to explain the response window and safe retesting procedure before you begin using the device. When a retest is requested, find a safe place to pull over and follow the instructions without allowing the device to distract you from controlling the vehicle.

Installation Alone Does Not Restore Your License

Having a device installed does not automatically authorize you to drive. You may also need a restricted license, proof of insurance, program enrollment, or approval from a court or licensing agency.

Check which vehicles must have an interlock and whether any exceptions apply. Do not assume that borrowing a car, driving an employer's vehicle, or traveling to another state removes your restrictions.

Costs Depend on the Provider and Program

Drivers are generally responsible for interlock expenses, which may include installation, leasing, monitoring, calibration, removal, and additional service visits. A low advertised monthly price may not include every charge, so request a written explanation of the total expected cost.

Some jurisdictions offer financial assistance for eligible drivers. Washington, for example, provides an application process for help with certain interlock expenses, but availability and eligibility vary by state. [Washington Department of Licensing interlock guidance](#)

Use a provider approved by the agency overseeing your requirement. Confirm that the provider's device, reporting process, and service locations meet your program's rules before scheduling installation.

Service Appointments Are Part of Compliance

Interlock programs require periodic service to check the device, maintain calibration, and review recorded information. Missing an appointment can create a compliance problem even when no alcohol-related test failure has occurred.

Keep appointment confirmations, receipts, and service records. If a breakdown, hospitalization, or another serious problem prevents attendance, contact the provider and supervising agency promptly rather than assuming the appointment can be skipped.

Report Device Problems Promptly

If the device malfunctions or produces a result you believe is inaccurate, document the time,

circumstances, and any messages displayed. Contact the provider promptly and follow the program's instructions for retesting or service.

A disputed reading should not be ignored, but it also should not be assumed to resolve itself. Keep relevant records and ask how to submit an explanation or challenge an alleged violation through the proper process.

Tampering Can Lead to Additional Consequences

Disconnecting the device, bypassing it, or asking another person to provide a sample can violate program rules and state law. Depending on the jurisdiction, consequences may include additional restrictions, a longer interlock period, probation consequences, or criminal penalties.

Anyone else who drives an equipped vehicle should receive proper operating instructions. Allowing another person to drive may be permitted, but using that person to supply a sample so a restricted driver can operate the vehicle is a different matter.

Interlocks Reduce Repeat Impaired Driving

Research supports the use of interlocks to reduce repeat offenses while the devices are installed. The CDC reports a reduction of about 70 percent in repeat impaired-driving offenses during installation. [CDC information on ignition interlock effectiveness](#)

That protection does not necessarily continue after removal. Assessment, education, and treatment when appropriate can help address the behavior underlying impaired driving and support safer decisions over time.

Understand the Requirements Before Removal

The end of an anticipated installation period does not always mean a driver can immediately remove the device. Program completion may depend on documented compliance, an approved removal date, and authorization from the appropriate agency.

Ask for clear instructions about completion and license reinstatement, and keep copies of written approvals. An attorney familiar with the relevant state's DUI laws can help explain disputed violations or unclear requirements, while the approved provider can address operation and servicing.